

〈Book Review〉

Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature: Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

## Vulnerable Conversation as Fragile Mirror

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For Richard Rorty, since Plato the history of Western philosophy has been deeply, comprehensively rooted in mirror-imagery, which is the attempt to discover the foundation of knowledge by means of accurate representations of reality. Philosophers have paid attention to the issues of eternity and certainty, and thus the primary business of philosophy has been considered to offer systemic, constructive theories of representation in order to guarantee the certainty of our knowledge about nature. In his masterful work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty argues that Western philosophy is obsessed with the impossible task of obtaining knowledge through accurate representations, and then suggests knowledge as social practice through participating in a conversation, which makes it possible for us to escape from that obsession. He thus proposes a “therapeutic,” “edifying” philosophy rather than a “systemic,” “constructive” philosophy (5). Rorty sees edifying

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philosophy as a philosophy, which not only keeps us from the delusion of the unchallengeable truth for which Western philosophy has relentlessly tried to search but also enables us to participate in a conversation.

This book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Our Glassy Essence," deals with the problematic dualism between mind and body. For Rorty, Descartes "invented" the mind as a mirror that reflects reality, and brought "the mirror-imagery," which is "the original sin of epistemology" (60). Rorty acknowledges that Descartes was to make it possible for Kant to develop an epistemology which replaced scholasticism, and thus his invention of the mind brought a "new ground" that provided a "field of inquiry" where the possibility of certainty would be found (136, 262). In this regard, philosophy as epistemology culminated in Kant who conceived the purpose of philosophy as the attempt to construct a systematic knowledge of all knowledge by means of "the Principles of the Pure Understanding" which the mind set up for itself. In Part II, "Mirroring," Rorty criticizes epistemology and calls into question several "successor subjects" to epistemology such as philosophical psychology, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of science. In agreement with both Wilfrid Sellars's attack on the myth of "givenness" and Willard V. O. Quine's attack on "necessity" and the analytic-synthetic distinction, Rorty develops pragmatism that lets us consider "truth" as "what it is better for us to believe" rather than as "the accurate representation of reality" (10). In Part III, "Philosophy," Rorty generalizes Thomas Kuhn's distinction between normal science and abnormal one. He likens epistemology centered in the tradition of Western philosophy to normal discourse. Just as traditional philosophy attempts to explain "rationality" and "objectivity" through

conditions of accurate representation, normal discourse is “conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution” by means of “agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement” (11, 320).

In opposition to this epistemological tradition whose purpose is the attainment of knowledge, Rorty proposes hermeneutics as edifications of descriptions which aims to make sense of “what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it” (321). From the hermeneutical point of view, knowledge is understood as a matter of social practice: “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation” (170). Rorty appreciates edifying philosophy, which not only prevents conversations from lapsing into “inquiry” or “a research program” but also enables to the continuing of conversations (372–73). The social practice takes place in a conversation and “the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts” (318). Consequently, for Rorty, edifying philosophy is an “expression of hope” for agreement among interlocutors who participate in conversations.

Though Rorty reiterates the necessity of a conversation in order to accomplish the hope for agreement, he does not say much about how to make a conversation in a concrete situation. His taciturnity makes his argument on the possibility of a conversation theoretical and optimistic. His theoretical view on a conversation is not irrelevant to his misunderstanding—or neglecting—of one of the most crucial features of existentialism: an active movement rather than a reactive one. Rorty explains existentialism by contrasting between systematic and edifying philosophies:

"Existentialism" is an intrinsically reactive movement of thought, one which has point only in opposition to the tradition. I want now to generalize this contrast between philosophers whose work is essentially constructive and those whose work is essentially reactive. I shall thereby develop a contrast between philosophy which centers in epistemology and the sort of philosophy which takes its point of departure from suspicion about the pretensions of epistemology. This is the contrast between "systematic" and "edifying" philosophies (366).

Rorty sees existentialism as "intrinsically reactive movement," which is always "in opposition to the tradition." He then attempts to extend the contrast between existentialism and the tradition to the contrast between edifying philosophies and systematic ones. Like edifying philosophy, for Rorty, existentialism is "intrinsically reactive," and the tradition is required to be reacted; thus, existentialism is the outcome of a reaction against the tradition. He goes on to even argue that edifying philosophers, including existentialists, know "their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over" (369). However, existentialism primarily focuses on personal, existential life regardless of its tradition. Existentialism seeks valuable meaningfulness of subjectivity as a way of the fullest expression of an individual life. What is at stake to existentialists is not to react against the tradition but to create and find the meaning of a personal life. Insofar as any attempt to escape from the tradition is based on a reactive movement, it would still remain in the domination of the tradition. Their work thus never loses "its point" as long as they focus on the meaning of personal life. In this sense, an existential movement is not a reactive action, the attempt to escape from the domination of the tradition, but rather an active

action, the effort to engage in the activity to fully express and create an individual life whatever the tradition is “out there.” The one and only thing existentialists are worried about is the danger of reduction of subjectivity to objectivity, which undermines the distinctive meaning and value of an existential life.

In addition, unconditional opposition to the tradition does not result in guaranteeing subjectivity as Rorty conceives; rather, the subjectivity can be secured through seeking the meaning of a concrete personal life. The existential meaning of subjectivity can be gained neither by following the tradition nor by reacting against it but by affirming personal existence. It seems that Rorty’s aversion to the tradition drives him to focus on the theoretical aspect of existentialism. Hence, he seems to overlook the “existential” aspect of existentialism; in fact, there are no other aspects in existentialism other than existential one. If Rorty wants to adopt existentialism in order to formulate edifying philosophy—for him, existentialism is a generalized philosophy of edifying philosophy (378)—then he should have paid attention to the active movement of existentialism rather than the reactive one. Otherwise, existentialism cannot be compatible with edifying philosophy. As long as existential life is neglected, edifying philosophy would be nothing but a theoretical endeavor.

In spite of the fact that Rorty calls into question the traditional understanding of truth and knowledge by means of accurate representation, which seemingly guarantees the fixed, unchangeable truth, he does not disapprove of the possibility of truth itself. He acknowledges truth insofar as it is understood pragmatically. In other words, for Rorty, truth is something not perennial due to the accurate representation of nature but

“edifying” according to, as William James says, “What it is better for us to believe.” Rorty says that edifying philosophy allows us to “keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth” and to “protest against attempts to close off conversation by proposals for universal commensuration through the hypostatization of some privileged set of descriptions” (377). As long as the conversation persists, as he points out, the hope of agreement will never vanish. Rorty, of course, accepts a possible disagreement, which is “exciting” and “fruitful,” because it will finally be “compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation” (317-18). What is at stake here is how we can compromise among different interlocutors who are participating in a concrete conversation.

Interlocutors in a concrete conversation are not free from power relations; hence, a conversation is not conducted among “power-free” participants. Rather, they have different and hierarchical positions in terms of politics, economics, religion and culture. In this situation, the conversation cannot equally reflect their positions and opinions like an unclouded mirror. Hence, the conversation can be dominated and controlled by the dominant while the marginalized are isolated from it. Whereas, for the former, the conversation would be “exciting” and “fruitful” because it can be merely a means to accomplish their own purposes in the name of a fair dialogue, for the latter, the conversation is no longer dialogue but rather monologue where their identities and subjectivities are subsumed under a pretend conversation; in fact, even though they are participating in a conversation, there would be no their voices in it. For the marginalized, a conversation is “drudgery” and even “lethal” in the sense that it can become a solipsistic monologue, privileging specific stances, in the disguise of a dialogue.

However, Rorty's focus on the outcome of a conversation, which promises the optimistic agreement of mankind, makes him belittle the conditions for a concrete conversation. He seems to conceive a conversation as an unclouded mirror that can not only equally reflect participants' different positions but also produce a rosy agreement among them, just as epistemology attempts to find the foundation of knowledge through an unclouded mirror as accurate representation that Rorty criticizes. A monologue in the disguise of a dialogue entails a covert tone of oppression and a potential for violence, and such dialogue cannot be free of suspicion that it serves a hidden imperialistic purpose. What is important here is "who" are participating in the conversation since they actually constitute the conversation itself in a concrete situation. In this sense, the conversation is not an unclouded and solid mirror, which can always accurately reflect every participant's position but a clouded and vulnerable one, which can be distorted and even broken at any time. In order to guarantee a conversation, ironically, it is crucial to recognize the vulnerability of a conversation.

Though Rorty's focus on the outcome of a conversation entails not only his lack of consideration of the conditions for a conversation but also his optimistic and theoretical views on a conversation, I do not intend to criticize the possibility of a conversation itself that Rorty proposes. As Rorty notes, this book is "no more than a prolegomenon" (390). What I want to do is to make it more pragmatic in order to have a conversation in a concrete situation. A conversation in the first place is neither given nor guaranteed; rather, it is vulnerable at any time. In order to make it dialogical not monological, we need to realize how vulnerable a conversation is like a fragile mirror. The vulnerability of a conversation does not reveal that there is no

chance to have a potential that gives hope for agreement. Instead, its vulnerability leads us to focus on the conditions for a conversation that actually give us a chance of a possible conversation in a concrete situation.